

MARTIN
PURYEAR



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With an essay by
Alex Potts

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY







THE PERSISTENCE OF SCULPTURE

Alex Potts

Over a career of more than forty years, Martin Puryear has been working steadily as a maker of sculpture, relatively unburdened by successive pronouncements of the death of the sculptural object, of its impossible status in a culture saturated by media images and exchangeable commodities. He has persisted with an astoundingly inventive oeuvre, making works that have a clear autonomy but do not ponderously assert a return to traditional sculptural values. *Big Phrygian* (2010–14) [PLATE 12], in the exhibition featured here, is a striking and powerful presence, but its shape also calls to mind a small Phrygian cap. This is not meant as a joke, but neither is it a monumentalization of this revolutionary symbol of freedom from tyranny and slavery. The shape is one that has long intrigued Puryear, its dynamism implicit in the title of a small iron sculpture in the show, *Up and Over* (2014) [PLATE 7]. Puryear's objects make an immediate impact as sensory, tactile things, but they are also densely configured in a way that repays attentive viewing. Unlike a lot of contemporary art, they ask the viewer to slow down. They share a commonality of purpose, but one that is hard to pin down — much in the way it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the behavior of a seriously committed and lively minded person. Thinking of the work in this exhibition, one would be hard put to identify an obvious formal affinity between the bulging, biomorphic mass of *Big Phrygian* and the artificial, quasi furniture-like constructedness of *Faux Vitrine* (2014) [PLATE 5]. What similarity there is — the way their basic shape echoes the profile of the Phrygian cap — is less a real affinity than an intriguing, casual resemblance that, if anything, makes one more aware of how different the two works are and how a larger shared purpose must be sought at another level. My essay is designed to offer ways of thinking about this.

Shackled, 2014
Iron
27½ × 30⅝ × 8⅞ inches
70 × 78 × 21 cm

OBJECTS, PRESENCES, AND THINGS IN THE WORLD

To fully appreciate the nature and extent of the diversity of Puryear's output, it is best to begin by looking back to some earlier moments in his career.¹ Although sustained by a strong sense of purpose and ethical and artistic integrity, it is a career that, more than most, resists accommodation to a standard trajectory of artistic development. Puryear firmly believes that once a project has been achieved it is necessary to move on and risk something different, not stay with the same idea and keep mining it.² This can involve circling back as much as moving forward. Among works from the same period, one often sees very different impulses operating, as in the early sculptures he showed in the "Young American Artists" exhibition at the Guggenheim in 1978. On the one hand there was the somewhat language-like wall piece *Some Tales* (1975–78) [FIG. 2], an array of horizontally aligned, differently worked thin pieces of wood that look like lines of writing in various scripts, but whose undulating or sharply notched forms remain strangely mute. In stark contrast, set on the floor was a large, smooth black shape titled *Self* (1978) [FIG. 1]. Its radical simplicity is almost Minimalist, though it is more natural-looking than artificially fabricated in appearance. Seemingly solid, on closer inspection it proves to be a hollow construction made of thin sheets of wood layered and pieced together. It has no clearly declared identity, yet neither is it a blank Minimalist form. Its powerful hollow presence has prompted a range of responses from viewers. Writing about *Self* in the mid-1980s, Michael Brenson, one of Puryear's most perceptive critics, had this to say as he pondered the contradictions between its apparent solidity as "a highly polished, five-foot-nine-inch-tall black monolith" and its actual make-up — a "hollow and light [...] wooden shell, constructed by crisscrossing layers of red cedar and mahogany in a shipbuilding technique":

Like so many of Puryear's works, it seems pure and simple, but it is in fact a bizarre hybrid, a bundle of surprises and oppositions. Its eccentricity has a great deal to do with the way it was made. [...] It seems to have the weight of black marble, only it is made of red cedar. The form seems as rooted as a mountain, but the shape also suggests the nose of an airplane that has just broken through the floor. And while the sculpture's shape is clearly phallic, it is also like a head wearing a skullcap.³

Two mid-career works by Puryear, made around the time Brenson was offering these thoughts on *Self*, offer a rather different disparity. *Timber's Turn* (1987) [FIG. 4] was first exhibited in a show of Puryear's work titled "Stereotypes and Decoys," and *Maroon* (1987–88) [FIG. 3] began as a part of an extended, straggly, untitled work in 1987 and took final form as a monolith when shown in the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum a year later.



FIG. 1 *Self*, 1978. Stained and painted red cedar and mahogany. 69 × 48 × 25 inches; 175.3 × 121.9 × 63.5 cm. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha. Museum purchase in memory of Elinor Ashton.

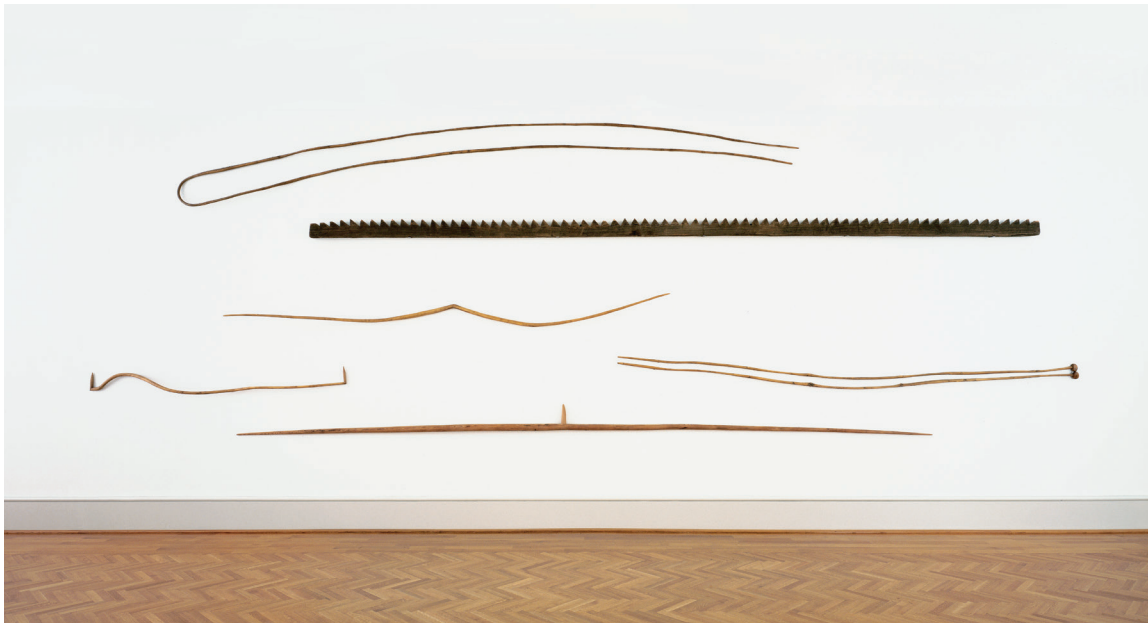


FIG. 2 *Some Tales*, 1975–78. Yellow pine, ash, and hickory. Dimensions variable, 157½ × 393¾ inches; 400 × 100 cm. Panza Collection.

Timber's Turn, with its upright wooden form, its flat-cut surfaces, its precise geometric shaping and plain finish, seems as if it should be a utilitarian object of some kind. It is slightly rough-hewn, clearly exposing the segments of wood from which it was made, but at the same time possesses a finely tuned poise and balanced uprightness. Precise yet very much hand-worked, it suggests a model for a decoy of some kind. Its form evokes the shape of a bird floating on water, but clearly no bird would ever be fooled by it. If it is a stereotype, it must be one invented by Puryear himself.

Viewer reactions to *Maroon* can be radically various, for a start because of its sticky-looking tarred wire-mesh surface, which lends the large, globular, biomorphic form a slightly repulsive rather than seductive tactile feel — as if it were an unidentifiable sea creature washed ashore after an oil spill. A critic reviewing an exhibition of Puryear's work in 1991 made a similar association:

Shaped roughly like a giant bean or egg sac, the enormous work is set on its side, so that its circular wooden base is turned at an angle.⁴ The name *Maroon* invokes the term used to describe colonies of escaped slaves [...] in the Caribbean in the 1700s. [...] Despite its brooding mien, the work exudes a swollen, biological ripeness that, merged with its enormity, suggests great fertility, like some vital seed ark that has been washed ashore.⁵

Puryear himself offered a quite different interpretation of the quality of wire mesh and its semi-transparency, seeing it as “mediating between a feeling of massiveness and fragility to reach a point of extreme vulnerability. Wire mesh allows for this. It can appear massive and opaque, but it is actually a thin veil.”⁶ A dual reading of this kind is more in keeping with the title, both in its straightforward sense (whatever is marooned is vulnerable) and in the more particular historical content of the word “maroon,” being the English version of the Spanish word *cimarrón*. This name was given to fugitive slaves living in communities in the wilderness of the Caribbean in the early days of plantation culture in the seventeenth century (hence the derivation from the Spanish *cima*, meaning “summit”). Puryear is very conscious of the legacy of slavery and its ongoing reverberations in African-American and white society today; such associations, with varying degrees of explicitness, form a thread running through his work.

What comes first for Puryear is the work of sculpture as an entity in its own right. More than a purely formal creation, it must hold its own as a physical thing. His answer, when pushed in a recent interview to state his intentions as an artist, sums up his ethos rather well: “If I were forced to describe my work, I'd say I'm interested in making sculpture that



FIG. 3 *Maroon*, 1987–88. Wire mesh, pine, yellow poplar, tar. 76 × 120 × 78 inches; 193 × 305 × 198 cm. Milwaukee Art Museum. Gift of the Contemporary Art Society.



FIG. 4 *Timber's Turn*, 1987. Honduras mahogany, red cedar, Douglas fir. $86\frac{1}{2} \times 46\frac{3}{4} \times 34\frac{1}{2}$ inches; $220 \times 119 \times 88$ cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Museum purchase, 1987.

tries to describe itself to the world, work that acknowledges its maker and that offers an experience that's probably more tactile and sensate than strictly cerebral."⁷ Associations should not be primary, and certainly they must not overpower a work's sculptural qualities. But the work should also bear testimony to the artist's purposes, which, if worth taking seriously, will have undercurrents that are not exclusively about making art. For Puryear, the associations that his sculptures provoke — and that his titles sometimes elicit, even if they do not encapsulate the work's meaning — are important. As he puts it, "I value the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in any way representing them."⁸ A particularly illuminating commentary by Jonathan Crary nicely characterizes this aspect of Puryear's approach: "Martin Puryear's work combines a rough-hewn elegance with the setting in motion of a field of conscious and half-conscious associations, through the practice of a kind of open referentiality."⁹

This overview of Puryear's career and the notable diversity of his sculptural objects find a fitting conclusion in two relatively recent works that stand out for their scale and evident ambition. While not public sculptures as such, they invite being taken seriously as public statements, even if what they signify is in no way readily decipherable. Radically different in formation, *Vessel* (1997–2002) [FIG. 5] is a large, open, robustly fashioned bottle-like structure, while *C.F.A.O.* (2006–07) [FIG. 6] is a radically hybrid top-heavy assemblage that forgoes the categorical wholeness of *Vessel*. At its base is a found object, an old wheelbarrow, which supports two further elements: an enlarged African mask and a supporting structure made from a multitude of short wooden beams that have the low-tech look of scaffolding. Unusual for Puryear, both works incorporate identifiable signs and motifs that, without quite delivering a message, seem to mean something. Like the African mask in *C.F.A.O.*, in *Vessel* a large black ampersand and small white period are set inside the bottle or vessel. Further, the title *C.F.A.O.* is short for *Compagnie française de l'Afrique occidentale*, the name of a multinational trading company that started operating from Africa in the late nineteenth century, traces of which Puryear came across during his time in Sierra Leone at an old warehouse bearing the company's logo.

Vessel puts one in mind of a large bottle or jar set on its side containing or entrapping something more intricate inside. As the title implies, it may also be floating at sea, possibly a bottle released with a note inside. One sees the beginnings of a message — the striking black ampersand suggesting an ongoing generation of phrases, and the white period marking completion or closure. There is a message whose presence is indicated but whose substance remains largely disembodied or possibly washed out, lost at sea. Still, this is a vessel loaded with some consequence, as a powerful black presence faces a small white caesura. The work has something of the everyday objectness of Oldenburg's



FIG. 5 *Vessel*, 1997–2002. Eastern white pine, wire mesh, tar. 84 × 181½ × 68 inches; 213 × 461 × 173 cm.

most interesting sculptures, though without the Pop overtones. It is considerably more intriguing than Oldenburg's 1993 public sculpture *Bottle of Notes*,¹⁰ in which a somewhat pretentious message is scripted around the form's interior and exterior surface.

C.F.A.O., as an object whose motifs have evident cultural and political associations, engages at quite another level compared to *Vessel*. The white mask is inverted. It curves inward, with the nose motif incised, but it is not the obverse of a mask. The back of a real mask would be roughly hollowed out and unmarked, while the shape here is in fact an enlarged negative imprint of a famous Fang mask. The other side — which, because of its apparently outward curving form, might momentarily be thought of as the front — is embedded in and hidden by the scaffolding. The relationship between the cultural associations of the different parts of the work is left open: the symbolic significance of the negative copy of a mask that is a product of traditional African society but also an item collected by European colonists and now residing in a Berlin museum, the associations with everyday building processes and improvisation suggested by the barrow and scaffolding, and those conjured up by the French colonial trading company named in the title. The sculpture's compositeness echoes an African world of different formations, some local and low tech or traditional and ritualistic, others foreign and multinational, with signs of the latter manifesting themselves within the material fabric and everydayness of the former. While it is not in any way a direct representation of West Africa or the colonial exploitation that followed the era of slave-trading, the sculpture, in its composite and richly referential make-up, still summons an actuality of some kind. The result is not a presence to be savored for its enigmatic qualities, for the stakes and issues are too evident and real for that, and the rhetorical tenor of the work and its material qualities too honestly matter of fact. It does, however, present one with an entanglement of forces and ways of being that ask to be recognized and pondered.

PHRYGIAN VARIATIONS

The exhibition featured here is unusual in that a single motif, tracing the profile shape of the Phrygian cap and its implicit dynamic of up and over, runs through all the works. Its schematic outline plays out in several different modes without ever becoming a structural armature that sets the terms of the works' conception, as was the case with the circle in a series by Puryear from the early 1980s. The motif has a symbolic resonance, but such resonance is often quite minimal or seemingly irrelevant in several of the variations he proposes. The link between the sculptures is left open, as is the sense we make of the motif in its different iterations, either at the level of sculptural conception or of symbolic meaning.



FIG. 6 *C.F.A.O.*, 2006–07. Painted and unpainted pine and found wheelbarrow. $100\frac{3}{4} \times 77\frac{1}{2} \times 61$ inches; $256 \times 197 \times 155$ cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Sid Bass, Leon D. Black, Donald L. Bryant, Jr., Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr., Agnes Gund, Mimi Haas, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, Donald B. Marron, and Jerry Speyer on behalf of the Committee on Painting and Sculpture in honor of John Elderfield.



C.F.A.O., 2006-07 (reverse).

The Phrygian cap has a richly freighted political history. It started out as the *bonnet rouge* or red liberty cap of the French Revolution, and over the nineteenth century it gained currency in several different ways, ranging from its official status as a symbol of a liberal French republicanism to its use as an emblem of the insurrectionary fervor of the Revolution's more radical, populist phase. At some point in the early 1790s it also acquired the sanction of antique precedent and came to be associated with republicanism and ancient Rome's freed slaves, hence its designation as a Phrygian cap. When it became a badge of political radicalism during the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, between 1792 and 1794,¹¹ it was deployed in a way that particularly fascinated Puryear. For a brief moment it became an emblem for those claiming for black slaves in the French Caribbean colonies the same rights to liberty as the people of France. In 1794, when the French Convention passed its anti-slavery legislation — revoked by Napoleon eight years later — a print of a black man wearing a red liberty cap was issued with the caption “Moi libre aussi” (I too am to be free) [FIG. 7].¹² The Phrygian cap has appeared in a number of guises, most notably worn by the gnome-like Punch, a jester inclined to outbursts of petulant violence, in Punch and Judy puppet shows; by American figures of liberty, often holding an American flag; and as an attribute of the French revolutionary figure of Marianne, immortalized in the famous *Liberty Leading the People*, painted by Delacroix in the wake of the France's July Revolution of 1830.

The most overtly Phrygian of Puryear's new works is *Big Phrygian* [PLATE 12]. With its characteristic conical profile enlarged to the height of a person, the sculpture mimics the texture of the semi-rigid fabric from which such a cap would be made. Creases on the underside where the cap tips down are created by barely perceptible indentations cut into the apparently smooth surface and are gently highlighted by touches of lighter red paint. The cap, however, does not remain a cap as one circulates around it. Viewed from the side with the bent tip, it looks a little like a thick-skinned, faceless creature probing its surroundings, perhaps a monster slug or a mutant manatee. Another work, *Up and Over* [PLATE 7], operates in a similar way, though rather more comically, with its extended drooping end looking a little like an elephant's trunk. The effect created by *Big Phrygian* is vaguely reminiscent of Brancusi's sculpture *Princess X* [FIG. 8], which from certain angles has a similarly biomorphic if more phallic quality. The probing or bending is a little angled to one side, giving the work an organic, live feel, further enhanced by the slightly irregular bulging of the main part of the sculpture, which becomes evident when viewed up close. With simple means — though with great care taken in the fabrication of the laminated wooden surface — Puryear has managed to achieve a very striking effect. The sculpture has an insistent presence that fills out and sustains the blaze of red emanating from its expansive surface.

Quite other is the finely balanced and freely unfurling poise of the wall piece *Phrygian Spirit* (2012–14) [PLATE 11]. The Phrygian shape is echoed in the curve traced by a sheet of wood attached to the wall, its frontal edge shaved to a knife-like thinness that gives it a deceptive appearance of fragility. The ends of the curling sheet are articulated by two thin, tapered cylinders painted white, from one of which a plumb-line descends. A touch of color is introduced by the red leather wrapped around the cylinder's outer end, and a black ball dangles directly below. There are subtleties in the make-up of this apparently simple work that take time to discern. Why it might be thought of as *Phrygian Spirit* is made more apparent by the contrast with its companion, *Phrygian Plot* (2012) [PLATE 6], another wall piece that also echoes the outline of the cap. This work looks decidedly more rigid and sturdy, an impression enhanced by the block-like patterning of the black and white veneered inlay. It is a sharply defined thing, one that could function as a cypher or emblem — the conspirator's sign, perhaps, with a scheme plotted in the checkerboard grid.

Faux Vitrine forms another pivot to this group of works, one whose structure seems both logical and perplexing. What is it? Its structural complexities make any relation to the Phrygian cap seem rather tangential. With its coloring, it is if anything more reminiscent of a fool's cap. Most immediately striking is the way it plays with one's perceptual mechanisms. From one angle it looks to be an opaque construction made of protruding colored slats of wood backing onto a large curved vertical form, while from the opposite angle it presents itself as a relatively colorless, somewhat precarious open wooden frame holding in place a sequence of reflective shelves. From this vantage there is seemingly no supporting element to hold everything securely in place, because the surface of the form providing the backing vanishes in the reflection it creates. The effect of precariousness is accentuated by a sense that the reflecting shelves are breakable mirrors, squeezed in between the wooden struts that hold things together — though they are in fact made of highly polished, sturdy stainless steel. The work is neither a firmly anchored nor an airily free-floating structure; rather, it is both. This dual identity does not quite sort itself out in one's mind even when one takes up an intermediate position and sees both aspects of the work simultaneously. Puryear here relies on a common perceptual aberration whereby one continues to see an optical illusion as true even when the trick that gives rise to it has been exposed. This said, the work is not about visual trickery but rather about the intriguing character the sculpture takes on once one is able to live with its supposedly illusory aspects and recognizes the optical experience of the latter as being in its own way quite real. To talk about illusion in the commonly accepted sense of the word, therefore, is a little beside the point. If one thinks of the work as a being like a vitrine, as the title suggests, this is not an ordinary, serviceable vitrine that has been falsified — a trick perpetrated on one's conventional notion of vitrineness. Rather, it is an actual faux vitrine,



FIG. 7 Jean-Louis Darcis, after Louis-Simon Boizot. *Moi Libre aussi*, 1794. Hand-colored stipple engraving. 5 $\frac{13}{16}$ × 4 inches; 15 × 10 cm. John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence.



FIG. 8 Constantin Brancusi. *Princess X*, 1915–16. Polished bronze. 24 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 15 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; 62 × 41 × 22 cm. Limestone block. 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 18 × 18 × 18 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950.



FIG. 9 Katharina Fritsch. *Warengestell II / Display Stand II*, 2001. Glass, aluminum, objects dating from 1981–2001. 79 $\frac{15}{16}$ × 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 203 × 120 × 120 cm. Edition of 2.



FIG. 10 Naum Gabo. *Head No. 2*, 1916, enlarged version 1964. Steel. 68 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 52 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 48 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 175 × 134 × 123 cm. Tate, London. Purchased 1972.

one that can lay more claim to being taken seriously than something that would actually function to display commodities. Another title Puryear had in mind, “Mis-Mimesis,” similarly suggests that the art involved is neither mimesis as traditionally conceived nor a postmodern recasting of mimesis as replication or appropriation, but rather a studied mis-mimesis that has its own logic and truth.

In its more transparent aspect, the work has a generic similarity to some of Katharina Fritsch’s displays cases [FIG. 9], but these, with their reflective shelves and items on display, replicate and ironize a slightly glitzy shop display case in a postmodern mode that is quite alien to Puryear. The structuring of the opaque side of *Faux Vitrine* with its bounded but open volumes has a rather different connotation. It is similar in its structural logic to early Constructivist works such as Naum Gabo’s *Head No. 2* [FIG. 10], the first version of which dates from 1916 but which now exists in a larger form, on a scale more like Puryear’s work, at Tate Modern. The similarity is most evident if one looks at the Puryear from the end that bends toward the viewer. This is not to make claims about influence, or about deliberate reference on Puryear’s part, but rather to suggest an affinity with the formal structure of certain early modernist works. This sense is reinforced by the chromatic patterning of the slatted side with its areas of pure color. As in some early modernist geometric abstractions, the set of colors is chosen to echo the structure of a color wheel with its basic primary and complementary hues. But in contrast to Mondrian, who used the traditional red-blue-yellow primary color model, Puryear draws on the four pairs of complementary colors in the modern CMYK model deployed in color printing.

The large work *Untitled* (2014) [PLATE 4] is a flamboyant demonstration of Puryear’s more architectural mode. It realizes on a large, three-dimensional scale the form of the Phrygian cap with a pointed end that is featured diagrammatically in one of his etchings [PLATE 2]. (This print also includes a model for the basic structure of *Faux Vitrine*.) The sculpture exerts a particular fascination partly because its construction manages to be both cleverly calculated and improvised. The overall design guiding the arrangement of its long, thin, slightly irregular bent wooden saplings conforms to a strictly regulated geometric model, but there are irregularities of detail because of the saplings’ natural variations. This more informal, improvisational aspect carries over in the way the joints between the saplings are secured with pieces of cord. One can imagine a low-tech culture assembling it from found materials as a support for a large, curiously shaped tent. Yet this idea does not quite apply, because the frame is for only half a structure, as if the tent-like form were sliced in two. The half form echoes that of the similar but less intricately designed open structure of Puryear’s sculpture for the Getty, *That Profile* (1999) [FIG. 11], which plays upon the ambiguity between a two-dimensional profile and a fully three-dimensional



FIG. 11 *That Profile*, 1997–99. Stainless steel and bronze. 45 × 30 × 11½ feet; 13.7 × 9.1 × 3.5 m. The Getty, Los Angeles.

sculptural form. The half form allows the viewer to see into and grasp the structure more clearly, at the same time that it introduces an abstract dimension, which blocks too easy a perception of the work as the recreation of a supposedly natural “primitive hut.”

Question (2010) [PLATE 3] highlights Puryear’s engaging ability to make light of the serious business of creating finely rendered, thoughtfully considered sculptural objects. Again the form picks up on the basic outline of the Phrygian cap, but without any suggestion of its volume. The work most resembles a large question mark that has sagged, its upper tip bending down to the ground while the other end remains anchored in a large spherical dot. Particularly vivid is the interplay between a sense of rising upward and falling back downward, accentuated by the flexible appearance of the main form, its grooves spiraling as if it had been twisted. This sensation of rising and falling runs through several of Puryear’s sculptures, such as *Lever 2* (1988–89), and is particularly charged in *Karintha* (2000), one of the plates he designed for Jean Toomer’s novel *Cane* [FIG. 12]. “Karintha” is a story in *Cane* about someone who as a child and very young woman carried “beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down,” but who ends tragically: “Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon.”

O cant you see it,
Her skin is like dusk,
When the sun goes down.

Such resonances may be very far from the tenor of a work such as *Question*, but they do alert one to an underlying presence and sensibility in Puryear’s project that should not be ignored. At the same time, it is important to remember Puryear’s reluctance to make heavy weather of possible symbolic associations. *Question* poses a question in a way that is neither self-important nor flippant — as a sculpture it has a certain weight and density by virtue of its sheer presence and the evident care with which it has been put together. It is almost a demonstration of the apparent simplicity of effect achieved by the intricate contrivances of Puryear’s approach to working wood. It highlights his interest in the distinctive qualities of different kinds of wood, with the main form being made of yellow poplar, the slightly flattened spherical base in pine, and the join between the two parts in ash. The main form looks as if it might be a single long segment of wood that had been grooved, twisted, and bent into shape, but it soon becomes apparent that, as in Puryear’s other sculptures, the form has been assembled from segments built up into a rigid structure. The look of the work, with its pattern of joinery, is partly a result of structural decisions required by the nature of the wood from which it is made — its directional grain and its tendency to expand and contract with changes in humidity.

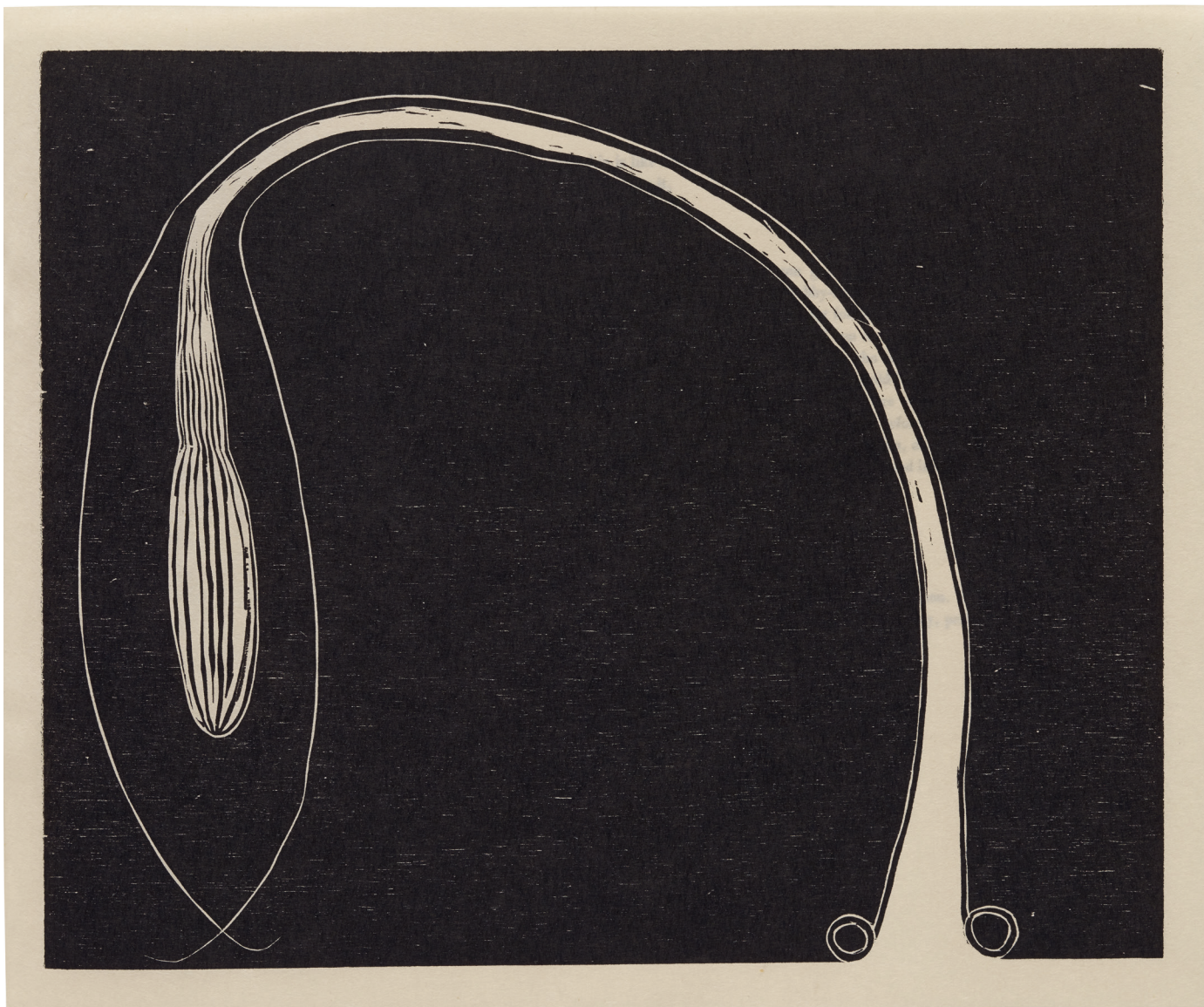


FIG. 12 *Karintha* (from Jean Toomer's *Cane*), 2000. Woodcut on Kitakata. 11¾ × 14 inches; 30 × 36 cm. Edition of 400. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro.

One work in the exhibition [PLATE 9] stands out as something of an anomaly — a flattish shape in black cast iron whose rounded forms offer no subtleties of surface modulation and which feels just a little heavy in a way that is uncharacteristic of Puryear's work. Seen from the side, it suggests a crouching being, animal or human, though formally it could still be seen to echo the Phrygian cap, decked out with an unusually long and elaborate bent tip. As a crouching shape, it features a disturbingly formed head — the eyes are formed by a bolt that seems to have been hammered through the skull, and the drooping mouth-like form taken together with the bolt is a shackle that could be seen as chaining or tethering whatever being this might be. The title, *Shackled* (2014), invites discomfiting associations, and while this is not in any way made explicit — and if it were it would undercut the work's ambiguous and disquieting implications — the word picks up on the title of a widely discussed recent book, *Shackled and Chained: Mass Incarceration in Capitalist America*, which attacks the radically disproportionate imprisonment of African-Americans.

The issue of slavery, not just as a historical phenomenon but as a legacy that persists within present-day American society, is a concern of Puryear's that is quite explicitly expressed in a memorial he recently designed for Brown University. *Slavery Memorial* (2014) [FIG. 13] consists of a broken chain rising up from a low dome in cast iron. The broken ends of the links are mirror-polished stainless steel, but the rest is unpolished, left to age and rust. The dome almost looks as if it could be the visible tip of a large sphere mostly buried underground, a highly charged presence now partially submerged by the passage of time but persistently there. This is complemented by an inscription set into a cylindrical granite base that records "Brown University's connection to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the work of Africans and African-Americans, enslaved and free, who helped to build our university, Rhode Island, and the nation." It also spells out how in the eighteenth century "Rhode Islanders dominated the North American share of the African slave trade" and how "Brown University was a beneficiary of this trade." The contemporaneous *Shackled*, with its curious crouching form and its tether, is not so explicitly political, but it has a public dimension. Its crouching form is echoed in the design of a temporary project that Puryear has been working on for Madison Square Park, which will be realized as a forty-foot-high open architectonic structure covered with a layer of chain-link fence featuring a gilded shackle. In this form the work becomes a looming as well as somewhat disturbing presence, but less densely solid and heavy in feel because of its semi-transparent fence surface, even given the rebarbative associations of such fencing with enclosure and barriers to public access.



FIG. 13 *Slavery Memorial*, *Brown University*, 2014. Ductile cast iron and mirror-polished stainless steel. 96 × 96 × 55 inches; 244 × 244 × 140 cm and 43 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 30 inches; 110 × 100 × 76 cm. Brown University, Providence.

WORKMANSHIP AND ART

Puryear's attentiveness to workmanship and processes of fabrication needs to be taken seriously, not just to be clear about the details of his artistic practice but also because it is absolutely integral to his conception of his work. It is both an aesthetic commitment that determines how we see and respond to his art, and an ethical one that informs our understanding of its purpose and integrity. Aesthetically, the physical realization of a work is for Puryear as primary as its conception, but not in the standard way it was for many modern artists. They envisaged their work as coming into being as a result of their working directly on and improvising with the materials or medium in which a work was being realized — as, say, was the case for many gestural abstract painters such as de Kooning or Pollock, or for David Smith as he was assembling and welding his steel constructions. Puryear is clear that he is not freely improvising in this way but rather working with a definite idea of what he is making and how he is going to realize it before he embarks on fabricating a sculpture. He also has chosen a mode of fabrication that does not allow for a process-orientated genesis of form, as modeling in clay might do: "I usually work with rigid materials, and typically I construct more than I carve, which means there's not a lot of spontaneity built into the process. Change and adjustment are certainly possible, but I tend to begin a work with the form and the method pretty well worked out," even if "it's important to be able to maintain some suspense about the outcome, if I can."¹³

Puryear goes in for simple, clear shapes whose realization involves a painstaking and skilled process of making. There is a sense of instantaneity and immediacy but also of slow deliberation. He does not want the form of his work to be a thicket of complexity — no fussiness — at the same time that its make-up as a material thing should indicate that it came into being slowly, through a quite intricate process. This is not something the artist takes as an end but rather as a factor he bears in mind while conceiving a work. Fabrication, providing as it does a basis for thinking about the form a work will take, sets framing parameters for its conception and helps to ground it. From the viewer's perspective, the situation is somewhat different. The relatively simple overall shape will often not immediately yield a sense of the process of making involved; indeed, at times it will belie its complexity. Awareness of the latter, though, is not meant to dominate one's response but rather is to be felt as an integral part of the work, there to be seen if one is looking for it.¹⁴

The process to which Puryear has committed himself is not only different from traditional carving or modeling but also from processes widely used in contemporary art constructions. His is a very specialized form of construction used in making furniture and prototype models out of wood, a combination of joinery and lamination. One of the few contemporary

sculptors to use a similar process is the British artist Richard Deacon, though in his case the lamination is often pre-fabricated, as he employs plywood that yields more readily to bending than solid pieces of wood. Puryear, discussing the fabrication of *Self* [FIG. 1] in an interview published in 1984, commented:

It was very important to me that the piece not be made by removal or abrading of material but rather that it is produced by a more rational process. It was put together piece by piece, though I finally arrived at a shape that existed *a priori* in my mind.¹⁵

The process has widespread practical use, not just in traditional boatbuilding, for example, but also in iron foundries. Wooden models fabricated in this way are used as prototypes to create the molds from which elements are cast. This work of the traditional foundry pattern maker, fashioning rigid and accurately shaped models in wood, requires a high degree of precision that Puryear very much respects.¹⁶

The fabrication process leaves traces on the surface of his work in ways that reward sustained viewing, complementing and adding interest to the simplicity of the overall shape. Such effects are discussed in *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, a 1968 book by David Pye, a British designer and writer about craft and workmanship who had a significant impact on Puryear's thinking. Pye offers a particularly illuminating analysis of the role workmanship can play in realizing a design that is not just functionally adequate but also aesthetically compelling — with design being what specifies the basic form of the artifact and the materials and processes of fabrication to be used. Pye offers some very instructive commentary on the aesthetic potential of a mode of fabrication such as Puryear's, in which the workmanship, rather than being exactly predetermined and uniformly regulated, as in mass production, is one in which "the quality of the result [...] depends on the judgment, dexterity, and care which the maker exercises as he works" and "is continually at risk during the process of making":¹⁷

In nature, and in all good design, the diversity in scale of the formal elements is such that at any range, in any light, some elements are on or very near the threshold of visibility: or one should say, more exactly, of distinguishability as elements. As the observer approaches the object, new elements, previously indistinguishable, appear and come into play aesthetically. Equally, and inevitably, the larger elements drop out and become ineffective as you approach. But new incidents appear at every step until your eye gets too close to be focused.¹⁸

Something very similar could be said of *Big Phrygian*. As one approaches and loses a sense of the overall form, previously invisible details come into view, first very slight irregularities in the bulging of the rounded surface, then finer joins between laminated segments, then the dappled effect of the shallow incisions painted a slightly lighter red, and finally faint marks left from the stapling that held pieces in place while the glue was drying. Stepping back so that these details sink below the threshold of visibility, one still has a sense of them enriching one's apprehension of the overall shape. A similar effect occurs with *Question* as one approaches and one's sense of the whole form gives way to an awareness of its intricacies, such as the splining and the arrangement of closely fitting segments visible on the surface.

For Puryear, a commitment to workmanship is not just a matter of aesthetics but also has significant ethical implications. Particularly revealing in this context is his insistence on the importance of the firsthand experience of African craftsmanship he had while working in Sierra Leone on the Peace Corps program from 1964 to 1966. In an address he gave at a conference organized by the American Craft Council in 2006, he explained how

In West Africa, I encountered skilled joiners and carpenters making everything of wood that the community needed, without fanfare or preciousness or self-consciousness but with a lot of skill. It was both inspiring and instructive. Part of the inspiration for me was that I saw people working without the benefit of sophisticated tools producing work of a fairly high order.¹⁹

Crucial here is the idea of workmanship of real quality carried out “without fanfare or preciousness or self-consciousness,” with relatively basic means, the antithesis of artistic virtuosity or portentousness. The kind of making associated with craft appeals to him for the absence of artistic egotism, its relative “anonymity,” as was true too of “folk artists who spend their whole lives working without even knowing that they’re artists, and they have this kind of compulsion. Somehow there’s a part of that that I take a lot of solace in.”²⁰ There is also the grounding of “strictly utilitarian objects” in a “principle that grows out of the needs of function” to which he is drawn, “a fullness of being within very strict limits — an inevitability, almost. The most powerful art for me has always contained something of this inevitability.”²¹

At the same time, he has made it clear on a number of occasions that art for him is not just about workmanship, and that craft and art are categorically different, for all the affinities at the level of the process of realizing a form or shape in material terms. In art, he explains, “there is a primacy of idea over both means or craft and function. Idea has to transcend

both. I think that's why it is so difficult for us to make art out of something functional."²² At the same time, he insists, "When I try to talk about craft and art I feel it's extremely essential not to talk hierarchically." Revealingly, he once noted how his "personal notion of craft is more comfortable with objects from a more stable, perhaps obsolete, tradition of material culture where ideally the kind of attention lavished on utilitarian objects would be equal in quality to that devoted to painting and sculpture, objects of contemplation, so-called fine arts."²³

His understanding of the affinities and distinctions between craft as the making of utilitarian objects and art as he came to practice it comes out particularly clearly in accounts he has given of how, when he moved to Sweden after Sierra Leone, he became fascinated by the woodworking tradition he found there in the manufacture of furniture. He was profoundly influenced by his encounter with James Krenov, "a furniture maker of gifts and sensitivity." The meeting helped Puryear consolidate his distinctive approach to making sculpture: "Exposure to his standards and to the level of his commitment opened my eyes to an entirely new world." It also clarified the differences there would have to be between the skilled making with which Krenov was involved and what Puryear was doing as an artist: "The result of meeting Krenov was that I was more committed than ever to pursue sculpture, and more respectful of the commitment of the seriously dedicated craftsman. The clear distinction between his practice and mine gave me focus and freedom to follow my path with a lot less confusion."²⁴

How does Puryear's work situate itself in relation to broader developments taking place in the art world when he was evolving his distinctive conception of sculpture? It is important to ask this not in order to place him within some history of modern sculpture but rather to clarify the nature of his vision as an artist. The formal conception of Minimalism was clearly an important inspiration for him. As he puts it, "Minimalism legitimized in my mind something I have always focused on — the power of the simple, single thing as opposed to a full-blown complex array of things."²⁵ At the same time, the act of subcontracting to a fabricator, and the split this entailed between conception and making, common to a lot of Minimalist work, became a negative point of reference that clarified his own commitment. A slight qualification, though, should be introduced here. Donald Judd's precision of conception, his feel for materials and precisely tuned but not overly elaborate and honestly exposed process of construction, which he demanded of his fabricators, does have echoes in Puryear's approach, even if Judd's machine aesthetic perhaps cancels out the sense of craft and workmanship so important to Puryear.

Puryear recalls how the commitment to craft that separated him from Minimalism became very apparent when he was a graduate student at Yale, from 1969 to 1971. By continuing “to work with my hands” in a context where “Minimalism and Conceptualism were dominant,” he was “made to feel like an anomaly within the department since so many of my classmates were thinking of art in a way that made the actual creation of the art object something perfunctory, even extraneous.”²⁶ This perspective carries over into the distance he now feels between his work and the image-based art of many contemporary sculptors, such as Jeff Koons, Charles Ray, and Katharina Fritsch. In Puryear’s view, their focus is on capturing a resonant image that defines the sculpture. The actual material fabrication is largely taken out of the artist’s hand, even if the artist is closely involved with the choice of materials and care is taken to ensure the finely crafted quality of the fabricated product. The struggle to realize an object through Puryear’s manner of working demands a different kind of viewing than the more instantaneous recognition elicited by more image-based work.²⁷ His approach is perhaps closest to that of some of the artists, particularly in the United Kingdom, who emerged as self-conscious makers of sculpture in the mid-to-late 1970s in the wake of Minimalism and Conceptualism, most notably Richard Deacon, who too has a serious commitment to fabricating work out of wood, and often favors shapes that are rather different either from the geometric or architectonic structures of mainstream modernist constructivism or from the grid-like forms of Minimalism. In contrast, Puryear’s objects have a distinct lightness of touch and a very human aesthetic rigor, as well as a restrained sense of humor that calls up associations with Brancusi’s sculptural creations.

Puryear’s commitment to workmanship is not literal or exclusive. He is quite open about the fact that large-scale public works demand a different approach that takes the final fabrication out of the artist’s hands — just as it has a different function and is subject to a different, less focused viewing than studio-based work done for a gallery setting. Still, he wants such work to preserve a feel of the handmade and, whatever its size, to retain some sense of human scale. His *Bearing Witness* (1994–98) [FIG. 14], for example, is fabricated by welding together bronze plates that are two feet high — much smaller than the whole work, which rises up forty feet.²⁸ The incidental irregularities enliven the surfaces of the smoothly shaped form while the succession of horizontal shadow lines at two foot-intervals also articulates its scale.

He also does not dismiss more conceptual or image-based work out of hand, even as he is clear that his own personal commitment is to a very different way of making. When reflecting on the distinctions between art and traditional craft, he explains how, in the contemporary world, “the making process itself can be crucial or it can be quite incidental,



FIG. 14 *Bearing Witness*, 1994–98. Hammer-formed, welded bronze plates. 40 feet (12.2 m) high. Installation at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington, DC. Administered by US General Services Administration, Washington, DC.

like an afterthought, really.” He adds, “For my part the physical act of making a work of art is essential.”²⁹ In his American Craft Council lecture mentioned above, he went as far as to suggest that, by comparison with the traditional skill of the craftsman, “today’s artist’s skill is closer to that of a linguist who conveys meaning through signs and symbols but whose expression has an extremely variable dependency on a physical scaffold or vehicle. In other words, one can make art that has a very minor connection to the physical world, and yet it can be interesting and compelling work.” Here he cited Cy Twombly, an artist for whom he emphasized he has “deep respect,” as having made “significant” sculptures “whose expressive potential owes very little, if anything, to the overwhelming skill of the artist controlling his materials.”³⁰

Why make sculpture? What does it do? What does it mean? No work will offer clear-cut answers to such questions, but if it merits serious attention, it must in some way sustain this asking — and must do so through having a distinctive *raison d’être*. The autonomy of the work’s existence as a physical thing and the intricacies of its material make-up may at one level get in the way of its referential breadth and symbolic power. At the same time, such muteness opens up possibilities for seeing in it something more than motifs and forms to which we can assign meaning. At issue with Puryear is sculpture as a kind of work in which its significance is lodged in what it is. If it is to mean anything at all, we have to be induced to take note of and pleasure in it as a material phenomenon we apprehend primarily in sensory terms. Such work can as a result carry its meanings lightly, and be the better for it — in the way that *Big Phrygian* sustains the cultural and political and psychological associations one might have with the Phrygian cap of liberty without being overburdened or submerged by them. The work has its own weight and purpose — in this case as much comic as serious — that simultaneously effects and deflects the associations it evokes, giving them a material anchoring that nevertheless remains inherently unstable. What the sculpture comes to mean as we think about the ideas conjured up by its form and possibly its title has something gratuitous about it, as if in the end this is never quite what the sculpture is really about. In this connection it is worth considering how Puryear’s comments about his conception of the artwork and his purpose as a maker of sculpture complement and reinforce one another: “I value the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in any way representing them”;³¹ and also: “I want to make sculptures that have their own history and their own reason for being.”³²

NOTES

1. Full accounts and analyses of Puryear's previous works are to be found in John Elderfield, ed., *Martin Puryear*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007); Neil Benezra, *Martin Puryear* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1991); and Hugh M. Davies and Helaine Posner, eds., *Martin Puryear* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1984). See also Jessica Ann Maxwell, *Heterogeneous Objects: The Sculpture of Martin Puryear* (Princeton University Doctoral Dissertation, 2013).
2. Conversation with the artist.
3. Michael Brenson, "Sculpture: Puryear Postminimalism," *The New York Times*, August 10, 1984; and "Maverick Sculptor Makes Good," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 11, 1987. Brenson first wrote about *Self* in a review of Puryear's retrospective at the New Museum in 1984 and returned to it in a very illuminating essay occasioned by an exhibition of the artist's work at the McKee Gallery, New York, in 1987.
4. This is only apparent — it never stood on the so-called base, and in its first iteration was already "on its side."
5. George Melrod, "Martin Puryear: The Art of the Decoy," *Sculpture*, September–October 1991, pp. 36–7, reviewing Puryear's 1991 Art Institute of Chicago exhibition.
6. Benezra, *Puryear*, 1991, p. 43.
7. Martin Puryear and Richard J. Powell, "A Conversation with Martin Puryear," in Elderfield, p. 106.
8. Statement by Puryear from an interview conducted in 2007 and quoted in *Martin Puryear: New Sculpture* (New York: McKee Gallery, 2012), pp. 5–6.
9. Jonathan Crary, "Martin Puryear's Sculpture," *Artforum*, vol. 18, no. 2, October 1979, p. 31.
10. The sculpture was installed in Middlesbrough, UK, in 1993.
11. On the early history of the liberty cap, see Richard Wrigley, "Liberty Caps: From Roman Emblem to Radical Headgear," *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France* (Oxford and New York: Bloomsbury Academic), pp. 135–86. Wrigley fails to take into account the liberty cap's deployment as an emblem of black slaves' right to liberty.
12. The designer of the print, the sculptor Louis-Simon Boizot, made models for the Sèvres porcelain factory, including one that argued for gender as well as racial equality. Titled *Moi égal à toi, moi libre aussi*, it represented a black man wearing the liberty cap standing beside a seated black woman. An image can be found at www.histoire-image.org.
13. Puryear, in Elderfield, p. 107.
14. Conversation with the artist.
15. Martin Puryear, Hugh M. Davies, and Helaine Posner, "Conversation with Martin Puryear," in Davies and Posner, p. 23.
16. Conversation with the artist.
17. David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 4.
18. Pye, *Workmanship*, p. 34.
19. Martin Puryear, "Shaping the Future of Craft," in *Shaping the Future of Craft, American Craft Council 2006 National Leadership Conference* (New York: American Craft Council, 2006), p. 26.
20. Quoted in Brenson, "Maverick Sculptor."
21. Puryear, Davies, and Posner, "Conversation," p. 54.
22. Ibid., p. 31.
23. Puryear, "Future of Craft," pp. 28–9.
24. Ibid., pp. 26–7.
25. Puryear, Davies, and Posner, "Conversation," p. 32.
26. Puryear and Powell, "Conversation," p. 104.
27. Conversation with the artist.
28. The bronze plates themselves are welded, not cast.
29. Puryear, Davies, and Posner, "Conversation," p. 31.
30. Puryear, "Future of Craft," 2006, p. 28.
31. Statement quoted in *Martin Puryear* (2012), pp. 5–6.
32. *Young American Artists 1978 Exxon National Exhibition 1978* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1978), p. 57.

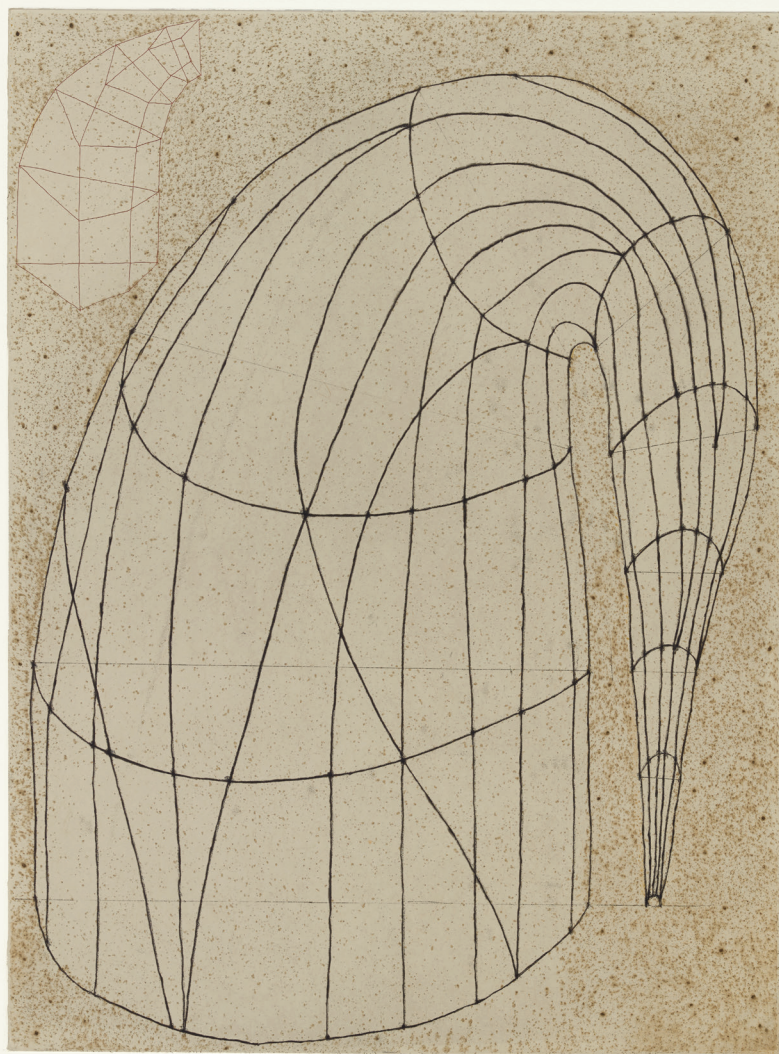
PLATES



24/50

M Puryen 2012

PLATE 1 *Phrygian (Cap in the Air)*, 2012. Color softground etching with spitbite aquatint, aquatint, and drypoint on Somerset White paper.



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Mary 2014

PLATE 2 *Untitled (State 2)*, 2014. Color softground etching with drypoint and chine collé on Somerset White paper.



PLATE 3 *Question*, 2010. Yellow poplar, pine, ash.











PLATE 4 *Untitled*, 2014. Hardwood saplings, cordage.











PLATE 5 *Faux Vitrine*, 2014. Mirror polished stainless steel, curly maple, black walnut, marine plywood, Japan color.









PLATE 6 *Phrygian Plot*, 2012. Inlaid holly and black dyed veneer over yellow poplar.











PLATE 7 *Up and Over*, 2014. Cast ductile iron.







PLATE 8 *Cascade*, 2013. Alaskan yellow cedar.











PLATE 9 *Shackled*, 2014. Iron.



PLATE 10 *Shell Game*, 2014. Yellow poplar, milk paint.







PLATE 11 *Phrygian Spirit*, 2012–14. Alaskan yellow cedar, holly, ebony, leather, string, milk paint.









PLATE 12 *Big Phrygian*, 2010–14. Painted red cedar.









PLATE 13 *Question*, 2013–14. Bronze.







LIST OF WORKS

PLATE 1

Phrygian (Cap in the Air), 2012

Color softground etching with spitbite aquatint, aquatint, and drypoint on Somerset White paper
35 × 28 inches; 89 × 71 cm

Edition of 50

PLATE 2

Untitled (State 2), 2014

Color softground etching with drypoint and chine collé on Somerset White paper
35 × 28 inches; 89 × 71 cm

Edition of 40

PLATE 3

Question, 2010

Yellow poplar, pine, ash
90 × 109¼ × 34½ inches; 229 × 278 × 88 cm

PLATE 4

Untitled, 2014

Hardwood saplings, cordage
174½ × 148 × 52 inches; 443 × 376 × 132 cm

PLATE 5

Faux Vitrine, 2014

Mirror polished stainless steel, curly maple, black walnut, marine plywood, Japan color
73¾ × 46½ × 40¾ inches; 187 × 118 × 104 cm

PLATE 6

Phrygian Plot, 2012

Inlaid holly and black dyed veneer over yellow poplar
60 × 74 × 4 inches; 152 × 188 × 10 cm

PLATE 7

Up and Over, 2014

Cast ductile iron
18⅝ × 26½ × 12¾ inches; 47 × 67 × 32 cm
Edition of 3

PLATE 8

Cascade, 2013

Alaskan yellow cedar
66 × 54¾ × 17 inches; 168 × 139 × 43 cm

PLATE 9

Shackled, 2014

Iron
27½ × 30⅝ × 8⅝ inches; 70 × 78 × 21 cm
Edition of 3

PLATE 10

Shell Game, 2014

Yellow poplar, milk paint
56¼ × 72 × 9½ inches; 143 × 183 × 24 cm

PLATE 11

Phrygian Spirit, 2012–14

Alaskan yellow cedar, holly, ebony, leather, string, milk paint
58⅝ × 74¾ × 15¾ inches; 148 × 190 × 40 cm

PLATE 12

Big Phrygian, 2010–14

Painted red cedar
58 × 40 × 76 inches; 147 × 102 × 193 cm

PLATE 13

Question, 2013–14

Bronze
87½ × 107 × 34¼ inches; 222 × 272 × 87 cm
Edition of 2

All installation views are from the exhibition
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